

Q. What is Literature according to Terry Eagleton. Discuss.

Answer---- The question of “What is Literature?” has been raised so many times, by so many scholars and researchers, yet it still remains open to discussion; since no answer seems to encompass everything that we tend to call “literature”. In that regard, Terry Eagleton’s introduction, is one of the most known to have tried to define “Literature”.

The first definition that comes to mind when one tends to think about literature according to Eagleton, is the question of fact versus fiction. Some tend to believe that literature is “imaginative” writing; putting therefore literature in opposition to factual and/or historical writing. Yet this distinction has some flaws, and one of the best examples is the one provided by Terry Eagleton when he says that “Superman comics” are fiction but not regarded as literature. We can therefore understand that the claim that literature refers to “imaginative writing” isn’t going to take us that far.

Literature therefore can be seen as a deviation from everyday language, or as described by Roman Jakobson as an “organized violence committed on ordinary speech”. This view according to Eagleton is the formalistic view of literature. In fact, its focus wasn’t on content but on form. The formalists only regarded literature as a particular organization of language. Formalism according to Eagleton was only „the application of linguistics to the study of literature“. Content was therefore secondary, not to say unnecessary, to the formalists. This view of literature is criticized by literary theorist Terry Eagleton. He argues that to claim that literature is a special kind of language presupposes the existence of a normal or ordinary language.

Another problem with the above view is that it sees the way in which something is said/written as being more important than what is actually discussed. That is if we decide to treat literature “non-pragmatically”, we can forget about any objective definition of literature, because as advocated by Eagleton, in claiming that, we are also leaving the definition of literature to „how somebody decides to read what is written. Eagleton continues in his discussion and adds that any piece of writing can be read non- pragmatically, as any text can be read poetically. Therefore, literature cannot be judged as being simply a discourse that must be read “non-pragmatically”.

This leads Eagleton to claim that there is absolutely no objective definition of „literature. We can only understand that since literature has a lot to do with value-judgements, the very crucial point suggested by Eagleton when he says that no piece of literature can be unfolded to a group of people without being changed; and this is exactly why literature remains an unstable affair.

Thus we’ve seen from the above analysis how different trials of defining literature lead to each other, only to get us as far as seeing literature as an unstable affair that can never be scrutinized in an objective manner. Yet the claim that what we tend to see as literature has a lot to do with value-judgements, is a very interesting one. We can also understand that ideology has a lot to do with what we tend to view as literature. Being very straightforward, one can say that the social groups in power wants us to consider certain piece of writings as literature and others as not. This can only push us to think that by reading what a certain society considers as literature we may understand a lot, about this given society. We also understand that for literature to be under so much invisible schemes, then it may only have a very crucial impact on the reproduction of social inequalities and power relations, this is why literature has come to be the slave of the social groups in power, for whom there are always social goods at stake.

Terry Eagleton, the internationally celebrated literary scholar and cultural theorist, being a distinguished Professor of English Literature in the Department of English and Creative Writing has a very critical ideology on the aspects of literature. What makes him so popular is that he remains, however, more than ever concerned with the meaning of literature.